

THE JEWISH QUESTION AS AN ECUMENICAL PROBLEM

by

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The discussion which follows is presented by way of answer to an inquiry from Dr. Visser 't Hooft : Why do so many American Christians take the position that there is no basic difference between the attitude the Church should take toward the Jewish people and its proper attitude toward members of any other nation or race ? This is called the "second" of two positions, the "first" being based on a strict construction of the teaching of St. Paul in the Epistle to the Romans. It will be noted that the question is a factual one, calling for a statement of opinions actually held. I have therefore sought to learn the facts from a number of American theologians and church leaders — persons whose own views on the subject I had not previously known, and who are in a position to reflect Protestant opinion.

I have been gratified by the straightforward replies elicited. By means of excerpts and summaries, and a bit of interpretative comment, I am sharing the results of the inquiry with the readers of this Review. It was, of course, in no sense a "survey," but rather an attempt to gather what might reasonably be regarded as an inventory, so to speak, of views held by Protestant theologians and church leaders in this country.

No inference can be drawn, of course, as to how widely any particular view is held, but the assumption implied in the posing of the question was manifestly justified : some form of the second position is reflected in nearly all the replies. There are many, to be sure — and this appears to be the prevailing view among the Lutherans — who find in Romans 9-11 a permanent, normative principle that should govern the Christian attitude toward the Jews as a people. The American Eastern Orthodox Churches foster the same attitude. Not so, it seems, the majority of those American Protestants who have, and who express, an opinion on the subject.

There is much reason, however, to think that most of our church leaders, clerical and lay, have never seriously considered the question

as a theological issue. Some of the best informed of the correspondents stress the American ideal of cultural pluralism. One of them writes : "Our strong demand in America for freedom for all types of religion has kept us, I believe, as Christians, from examining Judaism in the light of Christian theology." Another keen observer, who has devoted his life to missionary endeavor, ends a brief letter with these words : "The question seems to be so remote from the present day scene that I do not know how to deal with it effectively."

I think it would be a mistake to overlook the presumable effect on the attitudes I am trying to report of the continual blending of cultures in American society. Cultural pluralism is almost an article of faith. It expresses itself on a large scale in culturally mixed marriages which often cut across religious boundaries. It is currently reported, on the basis of what seems to be careful study, that there are annually in the United States 2,000 converts to Judaism, and that the critical factor is the marriage of Jews and non-Jews.

Let us notice now some opinions given by scholars who have devoted serious thought to this subject as a matter of exegesis and theological inquiry. I have received some statements from competent theologians which throw light on Dr. Visser 't Hooft's inquiry. One of the most eminent among the respondents writes as follows concerning the problem with which St. Paul was concerned :

"This problem had two parts : first, how to take the Gentiles in ; second, how to prevent the inclusion of the Gentiles from crowding the Jews out. I think it can be shown that every passage in Paul's epistles bearing on this subject needs to be viewed in the light of these two related interests ; and that, when they are so viewed, they afford no sound basis upon which to erect a theory of the Church which gives it any such continuity with the Abrahamic covenant as to make the conversion of the 20th-century Jews any more important in the eyes of God than the conversion of Hindus, Chinese — or Anglo-Saxon Americans."

A theologian widely known and influential in ecumenical circles has this to say :

"As I read Romans 11 it is a message of hope for Israel, but I doubt that it ever would have occurred to Paul that Christians centuries later could read his words as guaranteeing the salvation of Israel or placing the Jews' conversion in a different category from that of the Gentiles.

“With all due respect to the standing of the learned scholars who take the ‘first’ position, it seems to me that only a rather narrow Biblicism would prompt them to place upon these chapters the interpretation they do. One may legitimately make the Bible the basis of one’s theology, and still believe that it is its universal and not its parochial elements on which the Christian faith must be grounded.”

A scholar whose work is widely known in Europe says frankly :

“I think it is very questionable to treat our relation to the Jews as governed solely by the eschatological hope that without their conversion the final end cannot come.”

The head of one of our theological seminaries expresses his view thus :

“The position which St. Paul takes in the Epistle to the Romans grows out of his personal situation and the response of his people to the Person and work of Christ. The permanent value of St. Paul is not his argument about the Jewish people and the belaboring of the law but rather the universality of Christ and man’s justification through faith. This conception is possible to defend quite apart from Paul’s argument, much of which has distressed commentators and exegetes because of the particular use of the Old Testament.”

Writing in similar vein a high authority in Anglican circles says flatly :

“It is difficult for me to understand the reality of the position based upon Romans. To me the only basis of this point of view must be either Biblical fundamentalism or a sort of ivory tower theology which is removed from the practicalities and exigencies of today. St. Paul faced a definite and practical situation in his day and therefore met it head on. We are faced in our generation with our own situation and cannot find the answer by adopting the answer given many centuries ago.”

One of our keenest thinkers, who holds a position of high responsibility in cooperative Protestantism, had difficulty in distinguishing clearly the “first” and “second” positions. What, precisely, does “Jewish” mean? “What makes a Jew a Jew?” In America group relationships and antagonisms tend to reflect ethnic and cultural cleavages. In this country, he notes, for the most part “religion has not been a distinguishing characteristic contributory to tension” between groups that represent cultural entities. The great organizations through which the Jewish community consciously functions — for

example, the American Jewish Committee, the American Jewish Congress, B'nai B'rith, and the United Jewish Appeal — are not religious in any definite sense.

It should be remembered in this connection that anti-Semitism, which weighs heavily upon the Christian conscience of America, is primarily a cultural phenomenon; generally speaking, its religious component is probably incidental. There is no way of knowing the extent to which Christians shrink from making the Jews a modern "Israel" in a religious sense because of the danger of accentuating anti-Semitism.

With further reference to the problem of Jewish identity, the comment of a leader in interfaith activities, himself a Christian, is revealing:

"The Jewish nation — if by that we mean Israel, whether or not we include the Diaspora — is certainly a mixture of many elements, social, political and secular, with only a minority related in specific ways to orthodox Judaism. The Jewish people can sometimes be defined as a culture, but here again the religious connotation is not that which was envisaged by St. Paul...

"It is absolutely impossible in approaching an individual for a Christian evangelist to know that he is approaching a 'Jew' in the sense in which Paul would have defined the term."

One who has been for years a conspicuous leader in the ecumenical movement analyzes the problem in these terms:

"The man who says that Christ's Gospel is not for the Hindu or the Confucian, the Buddhist or the Jew is saying in effect that it is not the final and authentic universal revelation of God...

"This does not mean a special kind of approach to any human group — not even to the people of his own race 'after the flesh.' But it does mean that in every case the approach must be on the basis of real love — nothing less. He who would love the Jew into the visible Church must be aware of the enormous psychological and historic barriers which have to be overpassed. In that sense the Christian approach to the Jew *is* different from and more difficult than the approach to the average person of any other racial or religious background."

But this does not put the Jew in a special theological category. The approach here indicated would be quite as valid, the writer notes, with a person belonging to any other religious tradition. "The presuppositions on which it rests are universal, and ought to be; for Jesus 'broke down the wall of partition between Jew and Gentile' once and for all, as Paul insisted even against strenuous opposition in the early Church,

which for a time clung to a view which some in effect hold even today.”

But we must give some attention to aspects of the problem that are not matters of particular exegesis or specific doctrinal formulation. For good or ill, it must be recognized that in the thinking of some of our most representative Protestant leaders a somewhat changed conception of evangelism is in evidence. I have before me, as I write, an article by one of our most honored theologians, in one of our greatest denominational papers. Answering the question, “What do you mean by being Christian?” the writer says: “There are two sides to the answer. One is the ideal: what we are to be as Christians, as Christ men. The other is the decision, the devotion, the following after Christ.

“The plain fact is that we are Christians in the making. This was our Lord’s word to men: ‘Follow me and I will make you...’ They were to be disciples, learners.”

Then he cites Paul in Philippians 3: “Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect... but... I press on toward the goal.”

Now the point is that this characterization of the Christian life contains no explicit soteriology, to say nothing of eschatology. Against that background consider the following from one of the most eminent churchmen quoted earlier:

“I am, of course, eager to see all men Christians but I cannot single out the Jewish people as a special category. In many ways believing Jews are nearer the Gospel than any other non-Christians, and we can therefore have a basis of understanding and cooperation, if not complete agreement.”

In the same vein is a comment by another of those already quoted. He points out that “many Christians do not see any very essential difference between the faith of a Reformed Jew who may regard Jesus as the greatest of the Prophets and that of a Christian who does not regard belief in the Virgin birth as essential to Christian discipleship.” He notes further that “speaking of the source of the ethical values of our nation as the Judeo-Christian heritage implies that the Jews are very close partners and, if close partners, hardly to be regarded as outside the fold or alien to the faith.”

The serious implications of all this for those who hold to the “first” position — who take St. Paul with literal seriousness and contemporary relevance — is patent. An eminent Lutheran divine who writes in defense of the traditional position expresses this lament: “In this

concept [the Judeo-Christian tradition] Judaism sometimes seems to blend into Christianity at the cost of belief in the essentiality of Jesus Christ. At the very least He is reduced to the stature of a teacher or spiritual leader who carried forward the high traditions of the prophets." He goes on to speak of the present plight of "the Christian approach to the Jewish people," which lacks significant, indigenous American sponsorship. "Within the denominations themselves, more often than not Jewish missions are left to people with a special interest, many of whom are generally thought of as 'queer,' rather than being incorporated like every other phase of evangelism in the central work of the Church."

It is unnecessary, perhaps, to point up two different sets of implications in the opinions here reported. One has to do with the Pauline concept of Israel and the biblical idea of a "chosen people." The other has to do with the inclusion of the Jewish people in the Christian evangelistic appeal. Among those who see no occasion to make a special category for the Jews, in theological terms, are to be found many who unquestioningly embrace the Jews in their conception of the evangelistic outreach. Some apparently do this under the compulsion of the universality of the Gospel, but without relish for any sort of proselytizing, and without any conviction that the unconverted Jew will be "lost." Others address their appeal to all non-Christians without distinction and are quite unembarrassed when their mission brings them into encounter with Jewish people.

Those Christians who are disposed to regard a "Christian approach to the Jew" as gratuitous — who would, to put it tersely, evangelize all non-Christians *except* the Jews — present a paradox that must seem curious indeed to Continental Protestant theologians. They seem to see so close a historical and spiritual relationship between the Church and Israel that they regard insistence on conversion as gratuitous and in some sense an affront. This attitude, of course, is related, in indeterminate degree, to the apparent gradual change in the whole evangelistic pattern to which I referred earlier.

Let me repeat that it is not my purpose to argue this issue. I have tried only to throw some light on our theological situation in one of its aspects which most European theologians apparently find baffling and which distresses not a few of their American brethren. As one very influential Protestant leader put it, "The main question is what we are to make of the basic idea of 'the Chosen People.' If we regard this idea seriously (and we have to do so if our theology is to take its point

of departure from the Bible), then there really is a valid ground for thinking of the Jewish people somewhat differently from the way we think about other peoples.”

Perhaps one may generalize to this extent : Thoughtful Protestants in America agree that the concept of Israel, the People of the Covenant, has great significance for the Church and for the Christian tradition ; but many questions arise concerning the extent to which Christianity should be considered as furnishing a theological norm for the Jewish people.